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Out of Place: The Historiography of the Epigraphic Ceramics Found at Nishapur

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Out of Place: The Historiography of the Epigraphic Ceramics Found at Nishapur

by

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Dedication

To Christopher, for walking with me every step of the way. Thank you for everything.

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Abstract

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In 1937, the Metropolitan Museum of Art unveiled to the public a new gallery in the Near Eastern Department. This gallery contained the archeological finds from Nishapur, an ancient city in Iran that served as a major cultural center during the 9th and 10th century. Among the objects displayed in the exhibition were multiple black-on-white epigraphic wares, relegated to their own special vitrine at the entrance to the new gallery. The blessings, well-wishes, and proverbs inscribed on the ceramics against their white backgrounds instantly appealed to the archeological team from the Museum, with curator and Iranian Expedition leader Charles Wilkinson declaring that the epigraphic wares represented the most attractive example of eastern Iranian pottery. This assessment of the epigraphic wares represents the initial preference for the ceramics due to their modern aesthetics. Scholars like those at the Museum saw the qualities of harmony and decorative restraint represented in the Nishapur epigraphic wares as evidence that Islamic art – specifically, art from Iran – was a precursor for European and American modernism.

The Islamic gallery curators' fondness for these objects points to the way in which the aesthetic values of 20th century Western audiences influenced the reception and display of Islamic art objects by highlighting those that adhered to a particular visual criterion. In this case, we see the objects being prized for their so-called restraint and for the absence of geometric and floriated patterns associated with Islamic art. The epigraphic wares' display history is echoed in the current Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, suggesting that this preference never subsided. By examining the historiography of the display of the Nishapur epigraphic wares, we can see both how the initial choices made by curators perpetuated the idea that the epigraphic wares are exceptions to the canon of Islamic art, and how the objects were manipulated into Eurocentric art history.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

In the spring of 1936, the Metropolitan Museum of Art sent a team known as the Iranian Expedition to an excavation in the Sasanian and Islamic city of Nishapur in Khorasan Province. From its founding in the third century until its destruction by the Mongols in 1221, Nishapur was a center of major economic and cultural development. Prior to its destruction, Nishapur's commercial markets had flourished due to the city's proximity to extensive trade routes frequented by textile and ceramics merchants from China and Central Asia. Artists in Nishapur responded to the influx of Chinese porcelain and other imported ceramics with innovative techniques that appealed to an elite desire for exquisite ceramics. During their preliminary exploration, the Iranian Expedition found indications of productive ceramics kilns, and from 1936 to 1948 the team discovered hundreds of objects which were subsequently split between collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tehran museum. Included among these objects were epigraphic buff ware ceramics from the Samanid period (819-991 C.E.), which became one of the most iconic and widely-known ceramic types in Islamic art (fig. 1).

The so called "black on white" epigraphic buff ware group from Nishapur is comprised mainly of plates and bowls. Their characteristic decorative feature is calligraphic Kufic Arabic in brown or purple slip and is often inscribed across the interior, or in a concentric circle around the rim. Scholars identify the inscriptions as good wishes or proverbs, and they therefore appear to function as more than decoration. However, their composition and form, so starkly different than other objects in European and American collections which possess attributes of so-called *horror vacui* – a

culturally-charged term used by 20th century scholars to describe the intricately patterned and geometric motifs found in Islamic art – made the objects immediately attractive to collectors and museum staff when receiving the archeological finds from Iran. As the objects' composition and form were starkly different than other objects in European and American collections, they were immediately attractive to collectors and museum staff when receiving the archeological finds from Iran.

This thesis investigates the significant place of the epigraphic wares that were constructed by the Iranian Expedition team and later the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and argues that their sustained role in the collection at the Museum has shaped our reception of the objects. When examining their display history and favored place within the finds from Nishapur, it becomes clear that the appreciation of Nishapur epigraphic wares arose out of a Eurocentric tradition of art history. Viewers of the ceramics in the Islamic galleries at the Museum – whether consciously or subconsciously – were meant to view the ceramics with a different set of formalist approaches, separate from the forms of analysis employed in the remainder of the objects found at Nishapur. The history of display, discussions on the decorative style used, and their continued use today both within the Museum galleries and survey texts all provide contextual clues that point to the establishment of the Nishapur epigraphic ceramics as manipulated objects within the field of Islamic art history. This thesis also aims to turn the tools of the recent 'historiographic turn' in Islamic art history on one of the field's most well-known artistic achievements and consequently to better understand the construction of Islamic Art in the 20th century. That construction continues to shape how we view and display Islamic art today.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

Chapter One serves as a major historiography of ideas about the epigraphic ceramics within the Metropolitan Museum of Art during the early twentieth century. This chapter first establishes the methodologies and standard practices for Islamic art galleries at the Museum to elucidate how the commonplace actions implemented in the display of the epigraphic wares led to their favored position in the Nishapur collection and in the Islamic art galleries in general. It then addresses both the decisions made by the Iranian Expedition team during the excavations and the display choices made by the Museum after the arrival of the epigraphic wares in order to establish the higher status of the objects from their first moments in the public eye. This chapter also critically examines statements made by the staff from the Metropolitan Museum of Art that point to the place of the ceramics in ethnographic and anthropological construction of the Museum.

Chapter Two takes these early statements made by the Museum staff and uses them to underscore the formalist elements in the epigraphic wares that allowed twentieth-century scholars to treat them as special objects in the ceramic collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This chapter introduces the idea that the epigraphic wares from Nishapur are manipulated objects that fulfil the necessary role of Eurocentric art historical canon-building rather than revealing anything about the artistic traditions of the Samanids. By establishing the ceramics as manipulated objects, this chapter reveals how formalist analysis allowed scholars to isolate the works of art from a Samanid context and contextualize the epigraphic wares as precursors to Neoclassicism and early modern aesthetics.

Finally, Chapter Three returns to the epigraphic wares in the present day. This chapter examines how the ceramics are displayed in the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art after the 2011 renovation and shows how early 20th century ideas about the uniqueness of the ceramics still hold sway. The ceramics are given pride of place at the entryway to the Museum's new galleries, called *Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia (ALTICALSA)*. The position of the epigraphic wares in the galleries at the Museum today highlights the ongoing significance of the initial categorization of the ceramics within a Eurocentric framework, as first demonstrated through the actions of scholars at the Museum. In addition, this chapter will explore the relationship between the Museum's display of the epigraphic wares and survey texts in order to demonstrate the influence of the curatorial choices made at the Museum.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate produced several so-called "minor dynasties" in Iran, such as the Samanids (874-999), the Alids (864-928), the Ziyarids (928-1042), the Buyids (868-1055), the Tahirids (820-872), the Saffarids (869-903), and the Ghaznavids (962-1040). As the Samanids came to power, Nishapur experienced a commercial and artistic influx. Both artists and intellectuals found monetary support in the ruler Ismail ibn Ahmad Samani (r. 892-907) who succeeded in unifying the Khorasan province in the beginning of the tenth century with Nishapur as its capital. In the aftermath of the Arab conquest in the region, a large number of Arab (along with

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian) settlers arrived in Nishapur and assimilated into the culture of eastern Iran. The ruling noble class of *dihqan* remained in power as conversion to Islam continued to progress exponentially in the region, and scholars assume that the commissions and patronage of these powerful elites produced much of the artwork found at Nishapur.[1] A vast number of visual traditions converged in Nishapur alongside religions, making the artistic output during the Samanid period one of the most vibrant and diverse of the tenth century. The surface finds indicating this "Golden Age" of Nishapur drew archeologists like those at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the area – it was within this context that the Nishapur epigraphic buff wares were discovered.

[1] See S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Chapter 1 – History of the Epigraphic Ceramics in the Metropolitan Museum of Art During the 1930s – 1940s

Evaluating the history of the arrival of the Nishapur epigraphic wares at the Metropolitan Museum of Art serves as the first step in understanding the value systems placed on the objects that have defined them as exceptional within the Islamic art canon. While a small number of scholars have attempted to track the evolution of the Islamic art collections at the Museum, these previous chronologies of the collections have served only as a catalogue of museum display.[2] The analysis of the history of display of the epigraphic ceramics serves as a promising tool for interpreting the objects in their museological context, and studying the consequences of these display decisions can aid in understanding how we interpret objects in a museum setting in the field in general. This chapter explores Orientalist practices in the history of Islamic art displays at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and establishes a timeline of the cataloguing and exhibition of the Nishapur ceramics. Such a model has the potential to draw attention to not only the colonialist-informed decisions made by museum staff, but to also show to beginnings of a Eurocentric formation of knowledge regarding the Nishapur ceramics. Curatorial choices for the Nishapur ceramics, including which objects to display as well as choices about spatial arrangement and relationships between objects within the Islamic art collection, expose that their incorporation into the canon of Islamic art was marked by a Eurocentric formation of knowledge.

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2 Rebecca Lindsey, "Displaying Islamic Art at the Metropolitan: A Retrospective Look," *Now at The Met* (blog), entry posted February 2, 2012, https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2012/displaying-islamic-art-at-the-metropolitan.

In the last two decades, art historians and artists have increasingly turned their eye toward a critique of the institution of the museum and its practices, especially curatorial. These critiques reveal that curatorial choices are not neutral but are positioned within dominant discursive, social, and cultural norms. Outside the field of Islamic art history, artists like Fred Wilson have already explored ideas such as these through carefully curated exhibitions that highlight the preconceived ideas about the past that the viewer brings to the museum encounter. Wilson's work underlines the terms and titles museums impose to narrate particular periods in history.[3] In his landmark 1994 exhibition *Mining The Museum* at the Contemporary in Baltimore, Wilson used objects from the museum's own collection along with objects from the Maryland Historical Society to both disrupt and expose the biases held by visitors when interacting with a historical exhibition.[4] Individuals visiting Wilson's exhibition viewed silver drink service tools with slave shackles in a room titled "Metalwork 1793-1880", a Ku Klux Klan hood in a baby carriage in "Modes of Transport 1770-1910", a wooden whipping post in "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960" (fig. 2). The conventional method of static display, the reliance on museum curation as the arbiter of meaning and the expectations created from the room titles allowed Wilson to force viewers into confronting their own projected values on the objects shown in the exhibition. Many of the visitors expressed their discontent with being "tricked" into participating in the display, while some moved

3 Judith E. Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum," *Art in America*, October 1993, 111.

4 Fred Wilson and Howard Halle, "Mining the Museum," *Grand Street* 4 (1993): 170.

through the exhibition without ever noticing the artist's interventions.[5] The cumulative mode of exhibition-going is a learned behavior that the majority of present-day museum goers possess, and the artist used it for the purpose of subverting the expectations of a historical display.

Wilson's exhibition addressed the American history of slavery in relationship to colonial history museums and galleries, but his approach can be used to think more generally about how the display of historical objects directly affects reception and understanding. *Mining The Museum* successfully drew attention to an audience's perception of objects within the cases and vitrines in the museum but importantly, it was Wilson's artistic curation that exposed the narrative that he hoped for his viewers to see. Wilson's intention and curatorial actions changed how visitors saw the objects, underscoring that the way objects represented in museums are displayed has a major impact on their reception and understanding. This thesis aims to use a similar methodology through the use of a particular case study within the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By examining the arrival of the Nishapur epigraphic ceramics at the Museum and their subsequent time in the galleries, we can understand how museum displays of Islamic ceramics shape viewer reception in Islamic art as a whole. In order to accomplish this evaluation, the sequential actions by the Museum need to be mapped. Therefore, this chapter will evaluate a series of discrete moments in the lives of the Nishapur epigraphic ceramics within the Museum.

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5 Noralee Frankel, review of *Mining the Museum by Fred Wilson*, *The Public Historian* 15, no. 5 (Summer 1993): 107.

PREDECESSORS TO THE 1937 EXHIBITION

The landmark 1910 exhibition in Munich entitled "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" served as a primary model for the display of Islamic art objects at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3). Described as a "mega exhibition", "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" contained 750 textiles, 700 ceramic works, 500 illustrated manuscript pages, 300 objects described as metalwork, and thousands of other pieces, including Orientalist paintings by European artists.[6] The exhibition marked a turn in the method of display of Islamic decorative arts, which was previously marked by crowded art in large cases. The entire exhibition sprawled across 80 rooms which left curators with space to encapsulate individual objects, emphasizing the aesthetic value of particular objects and effectively releasing the works from their anthropological and historical associations.[7] The walls were painted white and objects were distanced from each other in order to foster an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of each object, a choice replicated in the majority of Islamic art displays in the 20th century. At the same time, objects in the exhibition were grouped according to medium and region in order to maintain an educational path through the exhibition in order to prevent replication of the Orientalist fantasies spurred by texts such as *A Thousand and One Nights*.[8] The desire of the exhibition curators to present the Islamic objects as aesthetically pleasing experiences

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6 Avinoam Shalem, "The 1910 Exhibition Revisited," in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Boston: Brill, 2010), 8.

7 Shalem, "The 1910," 9.

8 David J. Roxburgh, "After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions," in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Boston: Brill, 2010), 356.

while simultaneously providing viewers with encyclopedic information was addressed in the exhibition guide:

> The people in charge in Munich felt compelled to demonstrate how one might exhibit works of art from old and antique, unfamiliar and foreign cultures without, on the one hand, lumping them together with imitations or abusing them in the service of providing a panoptical view of 'cultural history', nor, on the other hand, transposing them into an environment and presenting them in 'make-up' that does not suit them.[9]

Despite this goal, head curator Ernst Kühnel found that visitors to the *Ausstellung München 1910* were uninterested in the presentation of the Islamic art, wistfully stating in his summary of the exhibition that the objects held no appeal to the audiences visiting the fairgrounds due to their somber and academic display.[10]

The negative reception of the objects at the Munich exhibition demonstrates what were, by then, the well-known ingrained attitudes towards Islamic art held by audiences in Europe. Faced with ceramics and textiles and other "decorative arts" but lacking the typical markers of Orientalism and imagined Arab lands, the objects held no value for the European viewers, who needed the references of popular stories and beliefs in order to interpret the objects. Nevertheless, in spite of Kühnel's evaluation, the model of display used by the curators at Munich largely set the tone for how Islamic art objects were exhibited in the following decades.[11] By the time the epigraphic ceramics arrived at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1930s, standard "museological" practices – including

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9 Ausstellung von Meisterwerken Muhammedanischer Kunst, ed., *Ausstellung Munchen neunzehnhundertzehn Ausstellung Munchen 1910 : Ausstellung von Meisterwerken Muhammedan. Kunst, Musikfeste, Muster-Ausstellung von Musik-Instrumenten*, 3rd ed. (München, Germany: Mosse, 1910), 43-47.

10 Andrea Lermer, "Orientalising Munich," in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Boston: Brill, 2010), 197.

11 Roxburgh, "After Munich," 363.

neutral wall colors, sparse furniture, controlled lighting, and thoughtfully spaced objects – was well established as the preferred mode of display for Islamic art objects in the museum. It seems contradictory that the practices that Kühnel perceived as a collective failure became the primary blueprint for exhibiting Islamic art – if Kühnel's audience needed a familiar frame of reference, it would seem that visitors to other museums such as Metropolitan Museum of Art would require the same. However, it appears that perhaps Kühnel wished to bring curatorial practice up to the same standards used for European and Greco-Roman art.

The standards established by Kühnel were eventually incorporated into practices at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Like the objects in the *Ausstellung München 1910*, the majority of the objects in the Museum's collection were donated by upper-class individuals living in New York. In 1891, Edward C. Moore, the artistic director for Tiffany & Co., bequeathed a number of objects to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, including Islamic metalwork and enameled glass (fig. 4).[12] Though technically Islamic art objects were already in the Museum's collection, the bequest marked the formal beginning of the Near Eastern collection, though it was not referred to by that title until 1932. Prior to Moore's donation, the few Islamic art objects in the museum were displayed alongside Greek and Roman glass and ceramics, and labeled as either "Persian" or "Assyrian". These objects were never discussed in terms of Near Eastern or Islamic art. Beginning with Moore's donation and through similar large-scale donations from New York elite in subsequent years, the Museum began slowly and

12 M.S. Dimand, *A Handbook of Mohammedan Decorative Arts* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1930), v.

purposefully building collection of Islamic art that consisted of primarily textiles, glass, woodwork, and metalwork.[13]

As the collection grew along with a more knowledgeable staff, one museum trustee remarked several years after Moore's donation that it was beginning to become apparent that the Persian and Assyrian collections needed separate museum displays, and that new experts were needed for each collection.[14] The new Near Eastern Art Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was chaired by Maurice Sven Dimand, previously the Associate Curator in the Department of Decorative Arts under Joseph Breck. Prior to the creation of the new department, all objects that did not fit under Paintings, Greek and Roman Art, or Egyptian Antiquities were a part of the Decorative Arts Department. Dimand immediately began requesting purchases which he felt rounded out the collection, as having a comprehensive history of the so-called Near East was a top priority for him. [15] He quickly employed copyist Charles K. Wilkinson and architect Walter Hauser, along other members of the Museum's Egyptian excavations like Joseph Upton to help him build the newly categorized collection.

Due to the relatively inexpensive market for Islamic art, the department grew rapidly in the early 20th century to include not only the permanent collections, but the creation of temporary exhibitions and the display of loaned objects as well.[16] By the 1930s, the Museum found that a new space was needed for the growing collection, and

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13 Lindsey, "Displaying Islamic," *Now at The Met* (blog).
14 Lindsey, "Displaying Islamic," *Now at The Met* (blog).
15 Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1970), 225.
16 Dimand, *A Handbook*, v.

Gallery E-15 was constructed in the beginning of 1937 at the northwest side of the main entrance to the museum (fig. 5). It was in here that the epigraphic ceramics from the Iranian Expedition team's archeological finds from Nishapur were first displayed.

THE IRANIAN EXPEDITION

A frequent practice in the 20th century, museums often funded archeological expeditions in order to build their collections as well.[17] In response to the growing Near Eastern galleries, the Museum team devoted much of their time to fieldwork, which resulted in several expeditions to Egypt and Iran in the 1930s. Charles Wilkinson, a member of the Egyptian Expeditions in the early 1930s, was sent to Iran in 1932 after the Museum decided to shift its energy to the Shiraz region after the Iranian government granted the team concession to begin digs in the area.[18] Walter Hauser and Joseph M. Upton, two team leaders from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, joined him at the archeological sites at various times over the decade. In the preliminary excavations, the Iranian Expedition team focused on Achaemenid art, studying architectural reliefs and ruins.[19] However, in 1934 the team's focus shifts, with Dimand stating in the 1934 *Bulletin* that a promising site in Nishapur was discovered and will potentially be excavated in the spring of 1935.[20] These excavations grew to include multiple seasons of fieldwork that would produce

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17 See David Carrier, "The Art Museum Today," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 54, no. 2 (April 2011)

18 H.E. Winlock, "The Egyptian and Persian Expeditions 1932-1933," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28, nos. 11 Part 2: The Egyptian and Persian Expedition 1932-1933 (November 1933): 3.

19 Walter Hauser, "The Persian Expedition," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28, no. No. 11 Part 2: The Egyptian and Persian Expedition 1932-1933 (November 1933): 40.

20 H.E. Winlock, Joseph M. Upton, and Walter Hauser, "The Persian Expedition 1933-1934," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 29, no. No. 12 Part 2: The Persian Expedition 1933-1934 (December 1934): 3.

hundreds of objects from across multiple centuries. Such a vast array of archeological finds was anticipated and the team from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and representatives from the Tehran Museum came to the agreement that each group would receive a "complete set" consisting of half original objects and half casts in the classic "partage" system.[21] According to Museum staff, a coin toss determined who received which originals.[22] From Wilkinson's perspective, the agreement seemed mutual as he reminisced about working with the team from Tehran: "It was, however, most gratifying to find the local authorities so willing to cooperate in our efforts to add to the knowledge of ancient Nishapur, for such a collaboration is most definitely of mutual advantage. The Iranians are extremely proud of their past."[23]

The Iranian Excavation team was financed by the Rogers Fund with the approval of the trustees, and worked with the recommendations of the Ministry of Education in Iran. The excavations began with trial excavations in 1935 and after substantial evidence of archeological materials confirmed their potential success, the excavations continued (with a brief absence due to World War II) until 1947. The trial digs began near the Shrine of Muhammad Mahruq, southeast of modern Nishapur, in an area roughly three square kilometers. Ten preliminary excavations were conducted, of which six resulted in the excavations that yielded the black on white wares – the digs at Sabz Pushan, Tepe Madraseh, Qanat Tepe, Village Tepe, Tepe Alp Arslan, and the East Kilns. Sabz Pushan, named for the greenery on the mound, was the first area cleared by the team (fig. 6).

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21 Charles Wilkinson and M.S. Dimand, "The Iranian Expedition, 1936: The Excavations at Nishapur," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32, nos. 10 Part 2 (October 1937): 3.
22 Lindsey, "Displaying Islamic," *Now at The Met* (blog).
23 Wilkinson and Dimand, "The Iranian," 22.

Digs by local commercial groups in Sabs Pushan had already exposed large walls with stucco decorations, which led Wilkinson to identify it as likely source of archeological material. In his report, Wilkinson refers to the excavation of Sabz Pushan prior to his arrival as illicit and illegitimate, carried out by the same local "peasants" asked to join the workforce supervised by Iranian Excavation leaders.[24] Throughout the report of the excavation, Wilkinson laments the nearness of the surrounding community, pointing out to his readers that "concerning the various sites excavated, the expedition was seriously hampered by the proximity, and in some instances, invasion, of cultivated areas. Under the law, cultivators could claim damages of the physical restitution of the site.[25]" Wilkinson's distress concerning the encroaching local farmlands suggests that Wilkinson believed that Iranians living in the Nishapur area were a threat to the objects that lay beneath their own properties. His attitude was widely held by American and European scholars, many of whom assumed that the Iranians were ignorant to the importance of their cultural heritage, and that it was up to Western researchers to unveil the significance of Persian art to the world.[26] Just as the excavation unearthed objects from the ground, Wilkinson felt that his duty as an archeologist was unearthing the artistic capabilities seen at Nishapur during the Samanid period. The "invasion" of local cultivators along with excavations conducted by Iranian commercial groups at Nishapur threatened this goal – though the digging conducted by these group was legitimate under

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24 Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), xxx.

25 Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, xxviii.

26 Kishwar Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation: Arthur Upham Pope and the Discourse on 'Persian Art' in the Early Twentieth Century," *Muqarnas* 24, History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the "Lands of Rum" (2007): 47.

the Iranian antiquities law passed in 1930, Wilkinson still refers to their actions as "ruthless exploitation", stating in his catalogue of ceramics that "Nishapur deserved a better fate than death by looting."[27]

Wilkinson's disappointment in the previous excavations conducted by local groups along with his concerns about the intruding surrounding community implies that his assumption was that the Iranian Expedition team were the liberators of the art at Nishapur. Controlling the site and therefore the objects found within it would have been immensely beneficial to Wilkinson and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. American and European scholars believed that Persia was the source for all artistic ingenuity in the Islamic world, and conducting the first major excavations at Nishapur provided the Museum with the opportunity to establish itself as a major cultural institution. Americans such as Arthur Upham Pope promoted the special place of Iran in history, pointing to the influential role of ancient Sassanian civilizations in the development of Arab, Turkish, and even Europe and China – an observation which, as scholar Kishwar Rizvi notes, helped Pope establish himself as a famous researcher in an increasingly popular field.[28] According to Pope, the "arts of Persia" produced prior to the 16th century represented a timeless moment of traditional art that acted as a precursor to European modern aesthetics. Everything else was considered a "curiosity".[29]

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27 Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, xxv.
28 Rizvi, "Art History," 47.
29 Rizvi, "Art History," 53.

The market for collecting Persian arts reflected this supposed specialness.[30] Wilkinson was exceedingly aware of the influence of the objects found at Nishapur and noted in his ceramic catalogue that great care was taken to only publish objects that came straight from Nishapur soil, since the measures for authenticity for the Nishapur ceramics had tightened due to the flooding of the market with "Nishapur" pieces due to the immense success of the American excavation team.[31] For the sake of the perceived quality of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, Wilkinson knew that the only way to control the art found at Nishapur was to exert as much control as possible over the conditions of the site, thus excluding local communities that might hinder the team's process and keeping American scholars in control of any discoveries.

Within those discoveries, the largest number of the epigraphic wares came from the excavations of mounds at Sabz Pushan and Tepe Madraseh, which Wilkinson reports as yielding 56 black on white wares.[32] Sabz Pushan was an oval-shaped site in which several small architectural structures with interior courts were exposed. Wilkinson describes Sabz Pushan as a "typical dwelling" with architectural design features and paintings on the walls of the structures and refers to the Tepe Madraseh as the most crucial excavation for the team, as it was discovered that the mound held a prayer hall, multiple mihrabs, a kitchen, several large halls.[33] The two locations of the discovery of

30 Rizvi, "Art History," 48.
31 Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, xxiv.
32 Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), 94-109.
33 Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, xxx.

the epigraphic black on white wares include both a private and public setting, which this thesis will explore in a later chapter.

The Expedition team created multiple categories in which to designate the ceramics found at Nishapur, named as follows: buff ware, color-splashed ware, black on white ware, polychrome on white ware, slip-painted ware with colored *engobe*, opaque white ware and its imitations, opaque yellow ware, ware with yellow-staining black, monochrome ware, Chinese wares, alkaline-glazed ware and its molds, and unglazed wares. This thesis is primarily concerned with the black on white wares, though several epigraphic wares are also categorized as polychrome on white wear due to the use of a deep purple-brown slip employed on the bowl. While obvious differences exist between the polychrome epigraphic wares and the black on white wares in that one uses color and the other does not, the fact remains that the deep shades of brown and purple slip provide a similar, dark appearance similar to the black slip.

According to museum records, hundreds of objects were shipped back each year from Nishapur beginning in 1935.[34] By 1937, the Museum felt that the department had enough material representative of the Nishapur excavations to assemble a special temporary exhibition in the newly built Gallery E-15. The new gallery served as one of the primary entrances into the Near Eastern art collection, meaning that visitors to the Museum likely saw the new acquisitions before viewing any other Islamic art objects owned by the Met. The 1937 special temporary exhibition served as the first viewing of a select number of Nishapur objects – included in that number were multiple epigraphic

[34] Marika Sardar, "The Metropolitan Museum's Excavations at Nishapur," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, last modified July 2011, accessed February 3, 2018.

black on white and polychrome epigraphic wares. Of the hundreds of objects listed in Wilkinson's report, only 90 epigraphic wares are listed, implying that these objects are only a small fraction of the wares found in Nishapur.[35] However, their treatment in the 1937 exhibition suggests that they were considered the most valuable objects from the excavation.

THE 1937 EXHIBITION

In September of 1936, John M. Upton first mentions the Nishapur objects arrival at the Museum in the Metropolitan Museum's *Bulletin*, which provides a short summary of the objects and excavations. He writes with some uncertainty about the results, and promises that future excavations by the team will "make it possible to establish a reliable chronology of the objects."[36] At this point, no information on the epigraphic ceramics is available to the Museum staff in New York. Later, in the 1937 bulletin sent out to all of the departments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, curator M.S. Dimand reported that a special exhibition of select recent Nishapur acquisitions were shown in Gallery E-15 from October to December of that year. Construction of Gallery E-15 was completed in October of 1936, and was designated as a space for small special exhibitions in the Near Eastern and Far Eastern departments.[37] He continues on in the report to remark that the

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35 Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 94-127.

36 John M. Upton and Charles Wilkinson, "The Persian Expedition 1934-1935: Excavations at Nishapur," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 31, no. 9 (September 1936): 180.

37 P. S. H., "Notes," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 31, no. 10 (October 1936): 214.

discovery of the Nishapur settlement guarantees to fill the collection at the Museum over the years with a variety of objects not yet represented in the galleries.[38]

The exhibition of the Nishapur ceramics and other objects opened on October 16, 1937. The exhibition showcased the first group of finds from the Iranian excavation, and were also the first objects to be shown in the newly built Gallery E-15 (fig. 7). One the left-hand side of the entryway to the exhibition (*a*), six white-on-black bowls were presented in a glass vitrine alongside photographs from the archeological sites (fig. 8). This early display is notable because it marks the beginning of the isolation of the epigraphic ceramics from the other archeological finds. On the top shelf of the vitrine is a chattered bowl, a bowl with a wide Kufic inscription, and an epigraphic bowl with a bird figure at the bottom. On the bottom shelf are three bowls that are seemingly grouped due to the similarities such as size, color, and ratio of decorative slip to empty background. Between them, all but two wares have an inscription. The designs on each of the bottom shelf bowls are of similar sizes and styles, though the inscription on the bottom-right bowl exists on the radius rather than the diameter. Other than the six bowls, the 1937 exhibition vitrine seems relatively empty, with only two other small objects on the bottom shelf. The carefully spaced objects amid the vitrines and neutral wall color refers to the prominent 1910 Munich exhibition, whose "pared down aesthetic attempted to

38 H. E. Winlock et al., *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, report no. 68 (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1937), 23.

combat the perception of this visual tradition as an art of bazaar crafts and decadent ornamentalism."[39]

Compared to the vitrine immediately to its left, which contains a mix of pouring vessels, polychrome bowls, and other objects, the white-on-black epigraphic ceramics are grouped according to their style, rather than the general location of where they were found or as a result of spacing issues within the vitrines themselves. Looking northeast in Gallery E-15, the epigraphic ceramics appear monumental, despite being smaller than the vast majority of the objects in the exhibition. On the opposing side of the epigraphic bowls were the stucco panels brought back from the courtyard dado in Sabz Pushan. Dimand highly prized the stucco panels, stating that they "reveal the splendor of Iranian art" (fig. 9).[40] The dado panels are elaborately carved with floral and vegetal designs that harmoniously fit within a prescribed border drawn by the artist. In the largest panel, three floral panels link together uniformly, though the details within the petals and borders vary between them. The stucco panel directly across from the epigraphic ceramics has similar vegetal designs, but also includes a fragment of an inscription which reads "posterity" (fig. 10). In this panel, the inscription's position implies that the message continued around the room where the panel was found.[41] Remarking on the inclusion of the floral designs with the inscription fragment, Walter Hauser stated in his report of their excavation that "[t]he Persian has always liked to cover every available surface of his

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39 Finbarr Barry Flood and Gürlu Necipoglu, "Frameworks of Islamic Art and Architectural History: Concepts, Approaches, and Historiographies," in *From the Prophet to the Mongols*, vol. 1, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 12.

40 Upton and Wilkinson, "The Persian," 3.

41 Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed., "Dado Panel," The Met, accessed February 10, 2018.

buildings with pattern".[42] The choice to place the stucco panels on the wall points to a preference for paintings, which was considered the apex of European art. Consequently, the stucco panels are displayed in a way that establishes their relationship to the European arts. By providing a work that appears to function almost as a painting, the 1937 exhibition primes the viewer to interpret the rest of the works as relative to European arts.

The influence of the 1910 Munich exhibition also provides a reason for why the epigraphic bowls were grouped together by style, rather than displayed with a variety of objects to show the breadth of the excavation like in the other vitrines in the 1937 exhibit. The German exhibition provided audiences the opportunity to consider Islamic art using the same approaches as European arts – rather than the objects piled high in the room as curiosities, one could expect to see curatorial choices surrounding not only the viewing of the object but the aesthetics of the room as well. When entering the Metropolitan exhibition space, the viewer would see the epigraphic ceramics on one side, and the stucco panels on the opposite wall. The two types of objects would counter each other in design, serving as a striking visual point for an American viewer seeing the objects for the first time. One the left, the almost uniform presentation of the black-on-white bowls displayed, in Wilkinson's eyes, "a complete absence of the elaborate all-over patterns that mar so much later work."[43] The newly arrived epigraphic wares served as a visual counterpoint to the standard narrative about Islamic art's obsession with ornament for visitors, providing for twentieth-century American audiences a new and unique way of

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42 Walter Hauser, "The Plaster Dado from Sabz Pushan," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32, nos. 10 Part 2: The Iranian Expedition, 1936 (October 1937): 23.
43 Wilkinson and Dimand, "The Iranian," 21.

thinking about Islamic decorative art while the stucco panels, though celebrated as a great find from the excavations, reinforced the notions about Islamic architectural decoration and art held by the staff at the Museum. The display also underscores the uniqueness of the wares, as the vitrine does not contain any objects that would distract the viewer from the black-on-white calligraphy on the bowls.

The decision to group the epigraphic wares by style rather than type or archeological location is further proven by the exclusion of a single epigraphic ware, which is relegated to a crowded vitrine further into Gallery E-15 (fig. 11). This bowl, bearing a white-on-black epigraphic pattern, can be seen in archival photographs in a vitrine along with pouring vessels, splash ware and figural bowls, and plates of various forms (fig. 12). This bowl was regarded highly by the Iranian Expedition team when it was unearthed, and was discussed as a prime example of tenth-century Iranian pottery. It seems curious that this object was not included among the other bowls located at the beginning of the exhibit hall. It exhibits the same traits as the top shelf of epigraphic bowls, particularly when compared to the chattered bowl shown at the top left of the vitrine. There appears to be two reasons that the bowl was excluded – the bowl is slightly smaller than those in the first vitrine, with a diameter of about 21 centimeters compared to the diameter of the bowls in the first vitrine averaging about 25 centimeters.[44] Perhaps including the bowl in the epigraphic case would disrupt the sense of symmetry in the display, though the sherd and lid on the bottom shelf already serve that function. More likely, due to the color of the bowl, the white-on-black ware was seen as disruptive to

[44] Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 94.

viewers looking at the black-on-white display for the first time, and was moved to a different case in order to not disrupt the harmony of the black-on-white wares. The result of these choices by the Museum curators, in particular the juxtaposition of the ceramics with the stucco panel and the uniformity of the display of black-on-white wares in a single vitrine, enabled the black-on-white epigraphic wares to function as aesthetically homogenous examples of exceptions to the Islamic art canon.

THE AFTERMATH

The Second World war served as an impediment to the Iranian Expedition team, who remained in Iran to continue excavations in the beginning of the 1940s. As conflicts in Europe grew, the team found that their route back to the United States was threatened, so they immediately began shipping nearly half of their finds and notes back home via India, thanks in part to the help from the British Minister in Iran.[45] After arriving back at the Museum in the early 1940s, every member of the Iranian Expedition was promoted from their previous position to Senior Research Fellow, likely due to the prestige and visual capital that the team brought to the Museum.[46] The Nishapur objects had already become a part of the permanent collection in 1939, and were thereafter always represented in the galleries.

However, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, much of the Near Eastern collection was evacuated to Whitemarsh Hall in Pennsylvania due to the perceived threat of air

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45 Charles K. Wilkinson and Walter Hauser, "The Museum's Excavations at Nishapur," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 37, nos. 4, The Iranian Expedition, 1938-1940 (April 1942): 83. Hauser even calls his notes and photographs “contraband”.

46 M. B. Dimand, "Notes," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (May 1942): 139.

raids. There was a period of unrest at the Museum during which many of the highly valued objects were not on view, including some of the major objects from Nishapur and fragile Persian carpets**.** When the Museum deemed it safe to return all objects from Pennsylvania, nearly all of the Near Eastern galleries were closed to make room for more shows from other departments. Much of the 1940s were devoted to postwar service to the community and the nation, and therefore the Museum was unable to devote efforts to working on the collections. However, once the war had long passed, the Museum immediately began "modernizing" the building and galleries.[47] In 1949, the Near Eastern collection was expanded to the D, E, and H galleries and the signage in the galleries first represented the objects as "Islamic".[48] The excavation photographs from Nishapur and stucco panels remained in Gallery E-15. The expansion of the galleries in the 1940s under the new "Islamic" title points to an increased interest in the Islamic art objects at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, resulting in the amplified exposure of the epigraphic wares to the public.

However, the rise in interest for Islamic art objects provides only a small explanation for why the epigraphic ceramics were the most valued objects from the Nishapur excavations. Their constant presence in the galleries pointed to their perceived importance to the canon of Islamic art as tools to connect Islamic art to the arts of Europe, but it was their formal attributes that solidified this connection to 20th century scholars. In the next chapter, this thesis will examine the visual elements of the

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47 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1940-1950: A Report to the Trustees on the Buildings and the Growth of the Collections," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 8, no. 10 (June 1950): 281.

48 Lindsey, "Displaying Islamic," *Now at The Met* (blog).

epigraphic wares from Nishapur to establish the connections made between the ceramics and Eurocentric art periods.

Chapter 2 – The Nishapur Ceramics as Manipulated Objects

The appreciation for the Nishapur epigraphic ceramics continued well into the 20th century. In the 1966 issue of *Ars Orientalis*, Lisa Volov remarked in that:

> To the Western eye, unaccustomed to the acrobatics of the Arabesque – a hallmark of Islamic art – the pottery of Samarqand and Nishapur offers a welcome respite. It has often been remarked that these amazing products of the Samanid world derive from aesthetics that are foreign to Islamic art. In place of the totally covered surface or so-called *horror vacui* we find a refreshing and remarkable appreciation of the empty space. Instead of a profusion of vegetal and geometric forms, it is the Arabic alphabet that serves as the major source of decoration. Bold, rhythmic Arabic inscriptions parade around the sloping inner walls of large bowls and shallow plates with the precision and confidence of a victorious army. Even the occasional designs which supplement the epigraphic decoration do not clutter the surface. It preserves a distinct, almost "Western" sense of void space.[49]

Volov's formal analysis demonstrates a number of key rhetorical tropes used by researchers to analyze the ceramics. First, Volov notes the harmony employed by the artist and its effect on the American and European viewer, whose viewpoint is privileged. Second, she states that the harmonious style seen on the epigraphic wares was "foreign" to Islamic art, further emphasizing the "typical" differences between Islamic art and Western art. Third, Volov points the arrangement of the black epigraphic text and its juxtaposition against the white background, drawing attention to its formal attributes of simplicity, balance and graphic boldness. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she defines the style of the ceramics as "Western". Her analysis points to the development of institutionalized categorizations of Eurocentric art history imposed on Islamic art by twentieth century researchers in order to interpret Islamic ornament more broadly – except for her last description. Volov's comparison of the ceramics to "foreign"

[49] Lisa Volov, "Plaited Kufic on Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," *Ars Orientalis* 6 (1966): 103.

aesthetics establishes the specialness of the Nishapur epigraphic wares through directly relating the Kufic calligraphy to "Western" styles. But what kind of "Western" style does Volov refer to here?

This chapter aims to explore this question by analyzing the visual attributes of the ceramics brought up by Volov in her 1966 article, but also frequently used by other scholars who discuss the Nishapur epigraphic wares.[50] The description provided by Volov provides the reference points from which the attributes of the ceramics are widely celebrated, and therefore her list of attributes bears examination. These attributes – visual harmony, decorative restraint, whiteness, and shape of the calligraphy and the bowl itself – will be discussed as individual aspects that help the objects retain their special status within the Islamic art collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Additionally, the term "manipulated object" will be introduced to describe the actions imposed on the ceramics by both the curators at the Museum and scholars within the field.

MANIPULATED OBJECT

In order to understand the actions by the Museum curators, I propose the term "manipulated object" as a definition of the epigraphic wares. The idea of a manipulated object is twofold – the object itself is used to represent an absent agent, and it therefore relies on the actions of those present to provide context for interpretation and meaning-creation. In this case, the artist and their immediate descendants are no longer alive and therefore the necessity and process for the object must be examined through a lens

[50] Oya Pancaroglu, "Serving Wisdom: The Contents of Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," in *Studies in Islamic and Later Indian Art*, by Rochelle L. Kessler, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 60.

removed from the objects' creation provided by canonical art historical practices.[51] As a result of this, within the museum, the narrative life of the Samanids is told through the objects in an artifact-civilization approach in which the epigraphic ceramics serve as a physical representation used for describing the absent Muslim communities involved in their creation. In this model, the object is seen as representational of the individual who created it – if that individual cannot provide an explanation for aesthetic choices activated in the object or how to object is used, then the construction of meaning is delegated to the institutions and individuals in possession of the object. This second aspect of manipulated objects is critical to how museological approaches used by curators and scholars at the Metropolitan Museum of Art affect the reception and status of the epigraphic ceramics from Nishapur. In order to better understand how the epigraphic wares became manipulated objects through the Museum's exhibitions and displays, I believe that the concept of the prime object must be addressed, as the cultural theorist George Kubler's theory is foundational to this argument.

The manipulated object is crucial to reinterpreting Kubler's establishment of the notion of the prime object, which denotes a singular invention from which all other derivatives, mutations, and copies are created.[52] His prime object signifies an important moment in history wherein all events and occurrences collude to produce a single, significant artwork, unlike any work of art produced before its inception. Like the mathematical concept of the prime number, the prime object cannot be traced to anything

[51] Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say 'Islamic art'? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 8.
[52] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 39.

and is only divisible by itself in composition.[53] Kubler writes that "the history of art in this sense resembles a broken but much-repaired chain made of string and wire to connect the occasional jeweled links surviving as physical evidences of the invisible original sequence of prime objects.[54]

Kubler's original definition emphasizes canonical constructions of art history and its ignorance towards non-European art traditions. This notion of a single moment in history, or what Avinoam Shalem calls "a fixation of time", that produces prime objects still adheres to a kind of scholarship that values the object only for interpreting a fixed historical point.[55] Because the exact use of the ceramics is unknown, curators must determine how to present the object without precise context. However, when a prime object is displayed, "any attempt to violate its form, shape, or status as such is sacrilege", as that would disrupt the historical authenticity of the object to the viewer.[56] Kubler later redefined the prime object as follows:

> Historically every work of art is a fragment of some larger unit, and every work of art is a bundle of components of different ages, intricately related to many other works of art, both old and new, by a network of incoming and outgoing influences. These larger units, these bundles of components, and these interrelations across time and space, constitute the study of historical style which is also called stylistic analysis.[57]

His reformulation of the prime object defines a work of art without an origination moment or disappearing point, in which the object's history continues to build as its life

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 40.
[55] Avinoam Shalem, "Histories of Belonging and George Kubler's Prime Object," *Getty Research Journal* 3 (2011): 8.
[56] Ibid.
[57] George Kubler, "Style and Representation of Historical Time," *Annuals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138, pt. 2, no. 2 (1967): 849-850.

in the museum continues. However, the definition fails to acknowledge that the history of the prime object can be controlled, whether past or present. The prime object is manipulated when those who hold custody of the object or in control of information about the object require that the objects fulfill a role that satisfies the immediate needs of the owner.

Examples of such manipulation can be traced back prior to the 20th century. Objects like the chalice at St. Denis acquired by Abbot Suger during the Crusader period were redesigned to fit with more popular French aesthetics (fig. 13). Previously an agate Alexandrian cup from the 2nd century BCE, Abbott Suger asked his goldsmiths mount the chalice in gold and silver settings, with gemstones and filigree.[58] The agate material of the cup is not native to the area surrounding France, therefore was recognizable as especially foreign to the medieval French. Typically thought of as artistic appropriation but also an example of object manipulation, the incorporation of the cup into the aesthetic desires of the abbot at Saint-Denis suggests more the needs of medieval French ecclesiastics than those living under Alexander the Great. The cup is a prime object of the Hellenistic period, but is manipulated by the French several hundred years later in order to better suit the needs of the new owners.

The purpose of the manipulated object within the museum institution is not unlike that imposed on the French chalice by Frankish church leaders. More recently, the world witnessed the display of artworks at the Modern Museum of Art in New York City by artists from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – all of the countries

[58] Sumner Crosby et al., *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 108.

affected the January 27, 2017 Executive Order issued by Donald Trump, poorly nicknamed the "Muslim Ban" (fig. 14).[59] Reacting to the order, curators at MoMA made the decision to restage multiple artworks in the collection to express their collective disapproval for Trump's action. When asked about the purpose of the reinstallations, Christophe Cherix, MoMA's chief curator of drawings and prints, said in an interview that the MoMA curators "wanted to have one in each room to create a rhythm. It was more this idea of embracing those works within our tradition, within the narrative of our collection, within our values."[60] In this statement, Cherix speaks to the manipulation of the works of art by artists from the affected countries. Rather than individual works of art, the MoMA curators repurposed the objects to fit into a visual narrative of political unity and condemnation of Trump's order.[61] Artists featured in the show like Tala Madani and Ibrahim El-Salahi likely never intended for their works to be used as an expression of solidarity with American politics and museums, but the curatorial decisions by the curators to use their artworks in a highly-publicized and politicized act changed the way museum viewers received them. Visitors to the museum are subjected first to the artwork's place in an immediate, current sociopolitical moment rather than an exploration of the meaning and significance of the original artistic integrity of the painting or

[59] Claire Voon, "MoMA Installs Works by Artists from Countries Targeted by Trump's Travel Ban," Hyperallergic, last modified February 3, 2017, accessed April 12, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/356224/moma-installs-works-by-artists-from-countries-targeted-by-trumps-travel-ban/.
[60] Ibid.
[61] For critiques of MoMA's exhibition in response to the "Muslim Ban", see Shiva Balaghi, "MoMA's Travel Ban Protest Exposes a Legacy of Closeted Modernism," Hyperallergic, last modified March 15, 2017, accessed April 12, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/365397/momas-travel-ban-protest-exposes-a-legacy-of-closeted-modernism/.

sculpture. The works by the artists from those affected countries thus became manipulated objects that fulfilled the needs of the curatorial staff at MoMA.[62]

The epigraphic ceramics at Nishapur are also an example of how museum curators subject Islamic art objects to manipulation. Their perceived specialness, initially communicated by the members of the Iranian Expedition team, and the initial display history at the Metropolitan Museum of Art implies that while the epigraphic wares were considered by the Museum to be prime objects that suggest the uniqueness of the Samanid artistic traditions, they also served as objects that could fulfill the curator's needs to project their own narrative. Financing the Iranian Expedition required justification by the Museum, especially in the years leading up to and surrounding the Second World War.[63] Therefore, the objects found needed to fill two necessary roles – to be unique and valuable enough to warrant the excavation expenditures, and to remain appealing to those visiting the museum. The narrative that the Museum projects through their display of the ceramics is one of reciprocity between valued and popular art traditions in the United States and Europe, namely classical and neoclassical art, and the modern art styles emerging from New York and European cities around the time of the Iranian Expedition excavations. The rhythm and harmony of the inscriptions and the limited color palette of the ceramics appealed to the desire of the Museum team to link the appreciation of Islamic art to the development of canonical art history. In particular,

[62] For more examples of this kind of manipulation in the 21st century, see Mary Bergstein, "Palmyra and Palmyra: Look On These Stones, Ye Mighty, And Despair," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 24, no. 2 (2016): 15. In this article, Bergstein examines the destroyed remains of ancient Palmyra through Joseph Eid's photography. She argues that the walls riddled with gunshots are "painterly" to the modernist-informed eye.
[63] Winlock et al., *Annual Report*, 23.

efforts were made to construct an interpretive framework that would complement the Museum's collection of Greek and Roman sculpture.[64] At the same time, the decorative restraint seen in the epigraphic wares served also as means of justifying the place of Islamic art within the aesthetic practices of Modernism, making them more valuable monetarily and thus enhancing the Near Eastern collection at the Museum.

NEOCLASSICAL HARMONY

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was able to create these appeals to American and European viewers through the rise of formalist criticism. First popularized in the early 20th century by European art critics such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, formalist critiques became one of the primary evaluation tools through the publications of New York-based art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994).[65] Greenberg believed that the principal mode of viewing artwork should be through their materiality and form, and by using those elements one could use "the discipline to critique the discipline itself."[66] The other aspects of a work of art, such as cultural, sociopolitical, and anthropological content, were considered irrelevant.[67] In a later essay, "Modernist Painting", Greenberg describes the function of art, stating:

> What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of

[64] Robert S. Nelson, "The Map of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997).
[65] Deniz Tekiner, "Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning," *Social Justice* 33, nos. 2 (104), Art, Power, and Social Change (2006): 31.
[66] Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" *New Literary History* 3, nos. 1, Modernism and Postmodernism: Inquiries, Reflections, and Speculations (Fall 1971): 172.
[67] Tekiner, "Formalist Art Criticism," 31.

> competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain.[68]

If we apply Greenberg's formalist model in the manner many early 20th century museum curators may have done, the "exclusive" effects of the epigraphic ceramics from Nishapur are embodied in the sense of harmony created by their inscriptions, which are arranged around the perimeter of the object and which were considered unique and rhythmic by the Iranian Excavation team. Through formalist analysis, a viewer of the object would have been able to isolate the formal qualities of the inscriptions on the epigraphic wares from their legibility and draw connections from their own visual familiarities, such as those experienced in the Greek and Roman galleries where the objects are more familiar, or through the then-budding modern art scene in New York. The formalist critique promoted by Fry, Bell, and Greenberg thus allowed the viewer to disassociate the ceramics from their Samanid context and relate them more toward familiar Eurocentric artworks.

The harmonious and balanced quality of the ceramics' calligraphic ornament appears to be one of the first elements used by the Museum curators as foreign to Islamic art. On one epigraphic bowl (fig. 15), Wilkinson remarked that:

> The glaze is free of color, and the black decoration, an inscription divided into four units around a central circle and ornament, produces a brilliant effect. The inscription consists of five words, their bases toward the rim, the tops of the vertical extensions bent to the left and bifurcated. Beginning at the right and proceeding clockwise, one may read the message as: *man kithara kalamahu kithara saqtahu* (He who talks a lot, spills a lot). The painter, having a good eye for balance, diminished the height of the *kaf* in the lowest group by half, preceding the two tall strokes of the *lam-alef*.[69]

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[68] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art & Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1965): 194.
[69] Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 98.

Wilkinson's remark about balance is repeated throughout his catalogue of the epigraphic ceramics. Rarely used to describe the polychrome and figural objects, Wilkinson's appreciation for the visual balance seen in the inscriptions seems unique to this particular grouping which he refers to as "*the* most worthy art" appreciated by the Samanids.[70] The harmonious and balanced qualities of the ceramics appear to be directly informed by Wilkinson's background as a 20th century art scholar, whose stylistic toolkit undoubtedly held the descriptions and appreciations for classical sculpture.

It is well known that an education in art during the 19th and 20th centuries (and arguably still today) meant the intensive study of Greek and Roman statues, temple architecture, and inscriptions. The revival of classical art in the 19th century began after the widespread distribution of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), a three-volume text circulated during the eighteenth century Graeco-Roman debates. With access to many of the Greek and Roman sculptures, Winckelmann established a canonical classification of Greek, Graeco-Roman, and Roman art along with mentions of Egyptian, Phoenician, and Persian art. In his text, Winckelmann demonstrates an overwhelming preference for Greek art and even Greek people, declaring that "some appear sublime, some clever, and their facial form is generally large, full, and harmonious in its parts."[71] His racialized views of ancient Mediterranean peoples permeates his descriptions in the *History of the Art of Antiquity*. In addition to these well-known biases, Winckelmann supports his arguments with the concepts of

[70] Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 92.
[71] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 119.

balance, geometry, and harmony that he saw in Greek sculpture.[72] He conflates harmonious Greek concepts of beauty with Christian concepts such as the likeness of God, qualities that are "enhanced by unity and simplicity."[73] He adds that, "according to this conception, beauty should be like the purest spring: the less taste it has, the healthier it seems to be, because it is clear of all foreign particles."[74]

Winckelmann's definition of beauty points to a taste for simplicity and harmony in artworks based on the perceived styles of Greek marble sculpture. As Neoclassicism rose in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the preference for this style grew among scholars and curators in America and Europe. In order to justify the acquisition of the epigraphic ceramics, the Iranian Expedition from the Metropolitan Museum of Art drew upon the precedent established by Winckelmann and subsequent scholars to find the exclusivity of the objects defined by formalist methods of critique. In a general description of the epigraphic wares, Wilkinson points out that the artist often "sacrificed legibility to achieve decorative balance."[75] In addition, according to Wilkinson, a common practice for the Nishapur artist was to "bend the tips of the verticals to one side, in effect weighting the extremities, thus helping to balance the top and bottom of the lettering."[76] The descriptions compiled by Wilkinson in the majority of his publications on the epigraphic ceramics focus specifically on the balance created by the calligraphy. In his major report on the excavations to the Museum, Wilkinson mentions the adeptness of the artist's technique, stating that the "elegance of the simple arrangement of the four

[72] Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 192.
[73] Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 196.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 92.
[76] Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 93.

groups of words in black has seldom been equaled. There is a real cleverness in the modification of the size of the Arabic letters to give a feeling of symmetry."[77] The artist's "cleverness", according to Wilkinson, produces a work of art that was uncommon to the artistic traditions of the region, increasing the value of the epigraphic wares in the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as prime objects within the canon of Islamic art. Furthermore, elevating the harmonious and balanced elements in the epigraphic wares also allows the objects to be manipulated into the canon of art created by Neoclassicist scholars, as the ceramics prescribe to the same values of harmony that dominated the judgements of art from antiquity as laid out by Winckelmann.

DECORATIVE RESTRAINT AND MODERNIST SIMPLICITY

The proliferation of descriptions regarding the harmonious style of the epigraphic wares is matched in number only by statements on the appealing nature of the ceramics to contemporary tastes. When describing a jug acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1961 *Bulletin*, Wilkinson declares that "there is no doubt whatsoever that this type, often so attractive to our present-day eye, was manufactured in Nishapur also."[78] In identifying the origins of the jug (fig. 16), Wilkinson reveals the tendency for viewers to associate the epigraphic ceramics with their own tastes. His judgments on the other epigraphic objects are presented with nearly identical statements, such as in the 1947 *Bulletin* where he states that a radiating pseudo-inscription on an underglazed Nishapur

[77] Wilkinson and Hauser, "The Museum's," 111.
[78] Charles K. Wilkinson, "The Glazed Pottery of Nishapur and Samarkand," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20, no. 3 (November 1961): 112.

bowl "is attractive to many modern eyes."[79] The characteristics Wilkinson uses to describe this appeal are in part made up of the harmony and balance discussed previously, but additionally the decorative restraint employed in the ceramics appears to play a major role in Wilkinson's assessments. He never elaborates on these statements, but through examination of the rise of Modernism in the early twentieth century, it is possible to imagine what exactly was "the modern eye" to which Wilkinson – and Volov - refers.

Concurrent with the departure of the Iranian Expedition for the first major excavation at Nishapur, art museums and studios were inundated with those escaping Nazi Germany. Artists and scholars fleeing from the collapse of the Weimar Republic in Europe took residence in major cities across the United States, especially in New York. Artists such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Josef Albers, and Marcel Breur from the German Bauhaus moved to the New England area, and brought with them ideas and approaches accumulated in post-World War I environments. We know that some of these artists associated with the Bauhaus also visited the 1910 Munich exhibition – Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Paul Klee each write about their experience seeing the Islamic objects.[80] Franz Marc even compares the collection of carpets at Munich with Kandinsky's non-figural works, stating:

> It is a shame that it is not possible to hang Kandinsky's wonderful compositions and certain other works next to the Muhammadan carpets in the rooms of the

[79] Charles K. Wilkinson, "Fashion and Technique in Persian Pottery," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (November 1947): 101.

[80] Rémi Labrusse, "Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation," in *From the Mongols to Modernism*, ed. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gürlu Necipoglu, vol. 2, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 1212.

> exhibition. Comparisons would become inevitable and how instructive that would be for all of us! What is the nature of the astonished admiration with which we behold this Oriental art? Does it not mockingly reveal to us the one-sided limitations of our European concepts of painting? Its mastery of colors and composition, a thousand times more profound than our own, casts shame upon our conventional theories. In Germany there is scarcely any decorative work, let alone a carpet, which we could hang next to this art. Let us attempt this with Kandinsky's compositions – they will hold their own in this risky exercise, not as carpets but as "images".[81]

While Marc's comment appears to applaud the artistry of the carpets and to admonish European painting for being somehow "lesser", it is important to acknowledge that his praise for these objects is visible only through their relationship to Kandinsky's artwork. The carpets, according to Marc, were teaching tools used to illuminate the hidden details of the paintings by the famous artist, helped by the fact the carpets were hung on the wall like paintings in an exhibition. Like the stucco wall panels beloved by Hauser at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, exhibiting two-dimensional works like textiles in a similar fashion as painting allows stronger connections to be made to the European arts, in particular artworks produced by early modern artists from Germany and America. A similar kind of appreciation for the epigraphic wares can be assumed from visitors at the 1937 exhibition, who would see the ceramics displayed in their own vitrine and placed across the gallery from the stucco panels.

Kandinsky and Marc were not the only artists drawing inspiration from their experiences with Islamic art. After visiting Tangier for a brief period in 1912, French

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[81] Franz Marc, *Briefe, Schriften und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. G. Meissner (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1910), 219-220. For more on early modern artists' encounters with Islamic textiles, see Claudia Tobin, "Decoration, Abstraction and the Influence of Middle Eastern Textiles," In Focus: Abstract Painting c.1914 by Vanessa Bell, last modified 2017, accessed April 7, 2018, http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/abstract-painting-vanessa-bell/decoration-abstraction.

artist Henri Matisse drastically changed his approach to color. In works such as *French Window at Collioure* (1914) and *The Moroccans* (1915), Matisse began to use bold swathes of black to divide his compositions, effectively emphasizing the other colors present in the paintings (fig. 17). Matisse's adaptations in his work after spending time in Morocco were defined as so important that one curator stated that they "assured [his] important position within the development of modern art."[82] In *Window at Collioure*, we can see a modern aesthetic favoring simplicity, a style that Wilkinson saw as echoed in the epigraphic wares. Certainly living in New York, Wilkinson himself as well as other curators at the Museum were aware of the growing trends in modern art.

Therefore, the ceramics function within the galleries at the Metropolitan as visual echoes of modernist aesthetics that could well have been seen in the artworks of early 20th century painters and sculptors. At the very least, scholars like Volov and Wilkinson noted the modern use of restraint and elegance in the epigraphic wares. The idea that the ceramics' decorative elements are restrained coincides with the widely-held view in the 20th century that Islamic art was mostly decorative and therefore bereft of meaning or contextual specificity, and could therefore be manipulated into the narrative of European and American art.[83] The decorative restraint in the ceramics, to Charles Wilkinson, represented Islamic works of art not subject to "the reluctance to leave blank spaces in the design" and could therefore represent the sophistication of the epigraphic wares in

82 Magdalena Dabrowski, "Changing Visions: French Landscape," *MoMA* 3, no. 2 (February 2000): 5.
83 Gürlu Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches," in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. Benoît Junod, et al. (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 8.

relationship to popular trends at the time, increasing the appeal of the Nishapur collection and the notoriety of the Iranian excavation team.[84]

84 Wilkinson, "The Glazed," 106.

Chapter 3 – The Epigraphic Wares at the Forefront

Scholars at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 20th century failed to acknowledge how the visual elements of the epigraphic wares were potentially interpreted by the original Samanid owners of the bowls and plates. In fact, very little scholarship today has devoted itself to this study. In a field focused on reinterpreting historical contexts of Islamic art, these highly-prized objects have little in the way of explanation for their existence.[85] Instead of enriching the cultural exchange of art practices at Nishapur, the ceramics function as a part of the Eurocentric positioning of power and the construction of aesthetic norms in twentieth century American scholarship. Very few texts seek to understand the deeper meaning of the inscriptions, thus preventing an in-depth exploration of their historical significance. Scholars like Melanie Michailidis argued that this reality has less to do with a lack of archeological data or primary sources, and more to do with the peripheral role of the Samanid empire in the history of Islam.[86] While Nishapur as a city is considered a place of great artistic output, the Samanid empire is considered a footnote between the two major dynasties of the Abbasids and the Seljuqs. The Nishapur epigraphic ceramics are even described on their exhibition labels as being "from Nishapur" rather than being "from the Samanid period", unlike their Abbasid and Seljuq counterparts which are described as being from their time period of origin. Why are the epigraphic wares so removed from their original historical context?

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85 Gürlu Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches," in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. Benoît Junod, et al. (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 12.

86 Melanie Michailidis, "Samanid Silver and Trade along the Fur Route," in *Mechanisms of Exchange: Transmission in Medieval Art and Architecture of the Mediterranean ca. 1000-1500*, ed. Heather E. Grossman and Alicia Walker (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 19. Her essay in *Mechanisms of Exchange* serves as one of the main inspirations for this thesis.

As seen in the previous chapter, divorcing the aesthetic qualities of the epigraphic wares from their historical context in order to pronounce the objects as "exceptional" proved useful to the curators and scholars at the Metropolitan Museum of Art since the formal elements of the epigraphic wares align with the artistic values seen in canonical European art history. Today, that may no longer be their primary purpose but the objects remain manipulated within the galleries for other reasons. The isolation of the ceramics from their Samanid history and contextualization into modern aesthetics serves as a comfortable place for the American or European viewer to think about the arts of Islamic lands without contending with any religious overtones. In other words, the Nishapur epigraphic ceramics in their museological context today provide viewers with the chance to view Islamic art without the "Islam". This chapter will explore this idea first by examining the placement of the ceramics in the current galleries at the Museum, and second by investigating the similarities between the Museum's display choices and the role of the epigraphic wares in survey texts on art history.

Art historian Wendy Shaw discuss the idea of "Islamic art without the Islam" as a purposeful tool employed by curators to promote Islamic art objects as ambassadors for the religion.[87] Shaw states that often, Islamic art exhibitions and displays focusing only on aesthetics attempt to dispel supposed prejudices held by contemporary viewers and by doing so:

> "…such exhibits not only fail to correct presumed contemporary prejudices (associations with terror, patriarchy, authoritarianism and so forth), but in fact

87 Wendy M.K. Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic art history: secularism and public discourse," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 2, accessed April 1, 2018, https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/shaw1.pdf.

> enhance them by reflecting the glories of 'Islamic' culture as part of a bygone golden age, or by suggesting that the appropriate environment for religion (and in particular Islam) rests in the past rather than in the present."[88]

According to Shaw's assessment, the value placed on the epigraphic wares for their visual appeal rather than their context in the Samanid empire continues to situate Islam in the past. Rather than focusing on the message of the inscription which the viewer assumes has religious overtones, the viewer can note the visual harmony of the letters, the contrast created by using black and white, the smoothness of the glaze. The current display of the ceramics aids in this formal analysis by situating a spectacular epigraphic bowl in the entryway of their Islamic galleries.

THE BOWL IN THE ROOM

In 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened the newly renovated Islamic art galleries under a new name – *Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia (ALTICALSA)*, and many of the objects remained in storage for seven years prior to the opening. Once the objects were put back on view, one reviewer of the opening of the new Islamic galleries pointed out the timing of the renovation schedule, lamenting that "the timing, barely two years after the events of Sept. 11, was unfortunate, if unavoidable. Just when we needed to learn everything we could about Islamic culture, a crucial teaching tool disappeared."[89] The role of the galleries is defined for the viewer here – the Islamic art galleries are important for the comprehension of the supposed

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88 Ibid.
89 Holland Cotter, "A Cosmopolitan Trove Of Exotic Beauty," *The New York Times* (New York), October 28, 2011.

culture of the individuals behind the terrorist attacks in New York City. Though the statement was made from a place of empathy, the role of the Islamic galleries was established early on as another place for manipulation of Islamic art objects during a particularly American sociopolitical moment. As with the instance of the MoMA installation of Muslim artists following the "Muslim Ban", the choices made by the Museum curators in the Islamic galleries often reveal more about the political climate of today than the historical and visual context surrounding the art.[90] The Museum curators, tasked with a difficult job in a strained political environment, opened the new galleries knowing that the religious implications of "Islamic" needed to be contended with through curatorial choices, beginning with the name of the gallery space. The decision to remove "Islamic" from name of the Museum galleries points to a secularization of the Islamic art objects, in an attempt to distance the collection from political and cultural tropes displayed by European and American media outlets.[91] Nowadays, the epigraphic ceramics from Nishapur occupy a space in which the "Islamic" elements are even more dissociated from their original conception.

The disconnection between the epigraphic wares and their Islamic context does not diminish their popularity in the Museum galleries, however. One large epigraphic ware in the galleries stood out to visitors attending the 2011 opening, and continues to be a focal point today (fig. 18).[92] The bowl is considered one of the finest ceramics from the Nishapur collection, according to its catalogue entry, and it is currently displayed in the

[90] Heghnar Z. Watenpaugh, "Resonance and Circulation: The Category "Islamic Art and Architecture"," in *From the Mongols to Modernism*, ed. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gürlu Necipoglu, vol. 2, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 1237.
[91] Watenpaugh, "Resonance and Circulation," 1238.
[92] Cotter, "A Cosmopolitan,".

main entryway of *Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia*.[93] One of the larger epigraphic wares from Nishapur, the bowl is inscribed with advice, reading: "planning before work protects you from regret; good luck and well-being" along the diameter of the rim in black slip (fig. 18).[94] Its isolation in a separate gallery from the Nishapur Excavation cases points to its perceived unique qualities, much like those seen by Lisa Volov and Charles Wilkinson in the 20th century. The placement of the bowl in the middle of the entryway speaks to a strategic knowledge of the audience, as the curatorial staff seem to use the aesthetic qualities that appeal to a Western-educated viewer in order to move them through the gallery space. The bowl primes the audience for the content of the galleries by representing what the visitor might already know about Islamic art, confirming their politically informed stereotypes about iconoclasm and calligraphy. The bowl from Nishapur thus becomes a comfortable lens to first approach Islamic art in the Museum galleries, performing the role as mediator between visitors, who emerge from either the galleries of Greek and Roman Art or Ancient Near Eastern Art, and the rest of the objects in the Islamic galleries. In addition, upon approach the viewer sees the bowl against a background of a Turkish carpet, another object a visitor might foresee viewing in the galleries of Islamic art (fig. 21). The bowl in the entryway serves as a representative gateway into the arts of Islam, but is arranged to anticipate the knowledge possessed by the average viewer. Equally fitting, as one exits the Islamic galleries, one enters the galleries of *19th- and Early 20th-Century*

[93] Maryam Ekhtiar et al., eds., *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 109.
[94] "التدبير قبل العمل يؤمنك من الندم اليمن والسلامه", from Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Bowl with Arabic Inscription," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed April 9, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451802.

European Paintings and Sculpture, further solidifying the role of Islamic art in the Eurocentric canon as a "medieval" phenomenon bridging the gap between antiquity and modernity.

The label for the bowl also states that "[w]ith its monumental presence and the artful arrangement of its letters, in which vertical flourishes punctuate the horizontal flow of the words at rhythmic intervals, this bowl stands out among the many other inscribed ceramics of the same period."[95] However, part of this monumentality described in the label can be attributed to the way the Museum mounted and lit the object (fig. 18). Placed on a gold mosaic floor design in the shape of a star, the stand-alone vitrine is lit from the front, blurring any imperfections that might – to use Wilkinson's own words – "mar" the stark white background of the bowl. With this lighting, the black inscription almost forms a radial boundary that zeroes in on the central black dot. From a distance, one might think it was a target or even a clock. The viewer must come inside the gallery in order for the object to reveal itself. Scholars like Oleg Grabar noted this display practice as symptomatic in the field, and proposed that because objects like the epigraphic ceramics might be considered a "minor art" in a Western viewer's mind, museums needed to aggrandize the presentation to justify the display of objects like ceramics.[96] In this case, the curator has achieved the necessary goal of getting visitors into *ALTICALSA* through such presentation.

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Oleg Grabar, "An Art of the Object," in *Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), III:15, previously published in *Artforum* 12 (1976): 36-43.

The significance of this bowl from Nishapur in the entryway of the Islamic galleries is signaled by the fact that it was not a part of the collection found by the Iranian Expedition team in the early twentieth-century. The bowl was sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1965 by Edward Safani, an Iranian art dealer working in New York City. Specializing in Islamic, Greek, and Sassanian art, Safani's gallery was instrumental in the growth of the Museum's collections.[97] Its purchase from Safani suggests that the Museum well realized into the late twentieth century that the epigraphic wares from Nishapur were strategic tools from the collection to attract visitors, but that they needed an exemplary prime object to become the face of the collection in order to demonstrate the Museum's comprehensive scope of the Nishapur ceramics.[98] In this sense, the Museum owns the majority of an art historical moment from Iran, and by owning the biggest and most beautiful epigraphic ware, the Museum remains in control of a perceived part of Eurocentric canon of art history as outlined neoclassical scholars, situating the Museum as a major cultural power in the field.

This role of the epigraphic bowl as the foregrounding object for the Islamic galleries is a common responsibility for objects that coincide with European artistic traditions and periods. Sculpture and painting, for example, function as "bookends" in Indian collections according to scholar Deepti Mulgund, a specialist in the developments of colonial Bombay.[99] In her study, Mulgund outlined a list of observations on the layout

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[97] "Edward Safani, 85, Founder Of Gallery Selling Ancient Art," *The New York Times* (New York), January 24, 1998, N.Y. / Region. Safani Gallery Inc. continues to operate today.
[98] Shalem, "Histories of Belonging," 7.
[99] Deepti Mulgund, "Imaginaries of the Art Museum: Banaras and Aundh in Colonial India," in *Images of the Art Museum*, ed. Eva-Maria Troelenberg and Melania Savino, vol. 3, *Contact Zones* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 225.

of the Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi, India. She found that the current displays at the museum reflect a nationalist approach taken by curators that highlights the "refinement" of Indian art through "choice specimens of high art forms such as painting and sculpture."[100] As one moved through the galleries, the outward facing rooms contained the best examples of these art forms, while the interior rooms contained textiles and portable objects. Like the galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the galleries of Indian art at Bharat Kala Bhavan are arranged to present the viewer with standards of Eurocentric canonical art history first, with the remaining works laid out further inside. The practice of displaying Indian art in this way first began in England at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1930s under curator Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, a scholar born in India of a British colonel. Codrington believed that the V&A Museum could be a "pedagogic tool that could help address – and ultimately repair – the eroding imperial relationship between Britain and India" during the rise of global colonial criticism.[101] He began organizing the collection around themes that thus became the preeminent approach to Indian art, a practice which has been deemed "a Malinowskian charter myth for the colonial project."[102] Colonial practices such as these by American and European institutions ensure that art historical knowledge from previously occupied regions remained filtered through a Western lens for the purpose of guaranteeing the power of Eurocentric scholarship.[103]

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 151.
[102] Mathur, *India by Design*, 152.
[103] Rizvi, "Art History," 48.

THE EPIGRAPHIC WARES IN SURVEY TEXTS

The manifestation of the epigraphic ceramics' role as mediators for Islamic art can also be seen in art historical survey texts where the epigraphic ceramics are mentioned. To date, few scholars address the role of the epigraphic wares in Samanid and Abbasid artistic dialogues, and yet the objects are often featured in broad art historical surveys as representative calligraphic and ceramic works. In *Islamic Art in Context*, the chapter devoted to literary arts begins with a brief introductory definition. The author, Robert Irwin, writes that:

> Islamic culture was highly literary, but like all other medieval cultures it was still to a large degree an oral culture. The ability to read silently (and indeed the desire to do so) was probably relatively rare. So, while looking at pictures in a book was usually a private act, reading was more often audible and public.[104]

Juxtaposed next to the definition of literary arts is an image of a black-on-white epigraphic bowl from Nishapur (fig. 20). The Kufic script follows the diameter of the rim, encircling four dots placed at the very center. Like the bowl in the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the bowl is inscribed with a piece of advice: "Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise".[105] With its place at the beginning of the chapter, one is led to believe that the piece serves as a prime object in the category of literary arts of Islam, but the text does not elaborate on its context. The Samanids are not mentioned anywhere in the chapter, proving that the aesthetic appeal of the ceramic, even through reproductions, provides more use to scholars than their historical context. Only through architecture are the Samanids celebrated for their artistic

[104] Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art in Context* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 167.
[105] Ibid.

contributions, perpetuating the value of architecture over art objects.[106] However, the inclusion of the epigraphic bowl points to a strategic usage similar to the one employed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This section of the survey text also attempts to shock or surprise the reader with the epigraphic wares to combat their presumed bias that Islamic art styles only feature all-over decorations. In addition, the bowl provides an entry point for the reader to begin thinking about Islamic literary arts, but without the immediately-apparent religious objects, such as calligraphy from the Qur'an or dedication inscriptions on architecture.

The book mentioned above, which specializes in Islamic art, represents the systematic representation of the epigraphic wares from Nishapur in survey texts, especially in those devoted to introductory overviews of art history. Stokstad and Cothren's *Art History* takes a similar approach in their commonly-used art history survey text. An epigraphic ware currently housed at the Musée du Louvre (fig. 22) serves as the introductory piece for the section on portable arts in Islam.[107] In the introduction, Stokstad and Cothren write that objects like the epigraphic wares "were eagerly exchanged and collected from one end of the Islamic world to the other, and despite their Arabic lettering – or perhaps precisely because of its artistic cachet – they were sought out by European patrons as well".[108] The authors make a fair point – a great deal of artists catered to foreign clientele by utilizing script or even pseudo-script on objects to make the artwork more visually striking. However, in the case of the Nishapur ceramics,

[106] Irwin, *Islamic Art in Context*, 70.
[107] Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothern, *Art History*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2011), 1:277.
[108] Stokstad and Cothern, *Art History*, 1:276.

scholars agree that the artists produced the epigraphic wares for local and regional tastes.[109] Therefore, in their original context the objects likely appealed more to upper-class, bilingual Samanid officials than the European missionaries and travelers referenced in the survey text. Once again, the placement of the epigraphic wares at the forefront of this section in *Art History* serves the purpose of mass appeal rather than providing context for the information presented in the survey. Additionally, one can even begin to see the subset of epigraphic wares that are valued higher than even those found by the Iranian excavation team. The purchased ware in *ALTICALSA*, the bowl represented in *Islamic Art in Context*, and the epigraphic ware in the introductory text by Stokstad and Cothern are fairly homogenous to anyone unfamiliar with Arabic script. The elongated letters with bold, rhythmic spacing within a dominating white space are the distinguishing features of the objects that become the face of the epigraphic wares, despite the fact that this type is just a small subset of the collection found at Nishapur. Therefore, the same elements that are used to justify their relationship to modern aesthetics as defined previously are the same ones used to define the category as a whole. The category of Nishapur ceramics is not based on historical truth – instead, the category of Nishapur ceramics is defined by those works that are most relevant to institutionalized canonical methodologies in the field of art history.

[109] Michailidis, "Samanid Silver," 21. Michailidis bases her argument on the fact that "the ceramics were found throughout Iran and Central Asia, but not more widely."

RESULT

The placement of the epigraphic wares at the forefront of gallery spaces and survey chapters posits the objects as representatives of Islamic art, but through choosing works that appear to the average viewer as harbingers of modern aesthetics, the curators and authors also alienate other objects that do not appeal to the Western imagination. The epigraphic bowl at the Metropolitan Museum of Art represents what the viewer already assumes – that Islamic art is non-representational, abstract, and linked across materiality through Arabic script.[110] As a result, all the artworks within the galleries and survey texts that represent the use of figural representation in the arts of Islam are seen as the exception by the viewer.[111] The viewer might even be disappointed when visiting the remaining Nishapur ceramics on display, which are shown with other objects found during the excavation such as ceramic bowls with human representation and small figurines that suggest a woman's body (fig. 23). Displaying the epigraphic bowl first allows viewers a "moment of communion" before interacting with artworks that might displace the viewer's biases. It is important here to acknowledge this viewer as the "typical" museum visitor – not every individual entering the galleries at the Museum holds negative attitudes on Islamic art of Islam itself. Often the generalization of the museum tourist relies on the assumption that the majority of visitors are white, Christian, and of American or European descent. This notion is backed by statistical fact – a 2010 study by the American Alliance of Museums found that 79 percent of museum visitors

110 Cotter, "A Cosmopolitan,".
111 Shaw, "The Islam," 5.

identified as white – but the remaining group of individuals visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art might have an entirely different experience with the ceramics, depending on their background.[112] Acknowledging the small fraction of diverse viewers is important to reinterpreting the reception of Islamic art display – however, for the sake of this thesis, the viewer in the Islamic galleries is a part of the white majority that likely holds anti-Islamic biases instilled by the highly-publicized actions of fundamentalist terrorist groups. Confronting this viewer's prejudices on Islam, and to a greater degree Muslim people, is a daunting task for museum curators, and it is much easier for museums to engage viewers with Islamic art by displaying objects that "can be shown to initiate the birth of a novel Western artistic language" than displaying one that causes the viewer to question their own perception of a so-often demonized religion.[113] The ceramics are seen as valuable and necessary to Western art, and the viewer can begin to associate their Islamic context with their positive influence on European and American aesthetics. The epigraphic wares thus end up representing the good and valuable qualities of Islam through their mediator role at the beginning of exhibitions and survey texts – without them, the typical viewer remains entrenched in their preconceived notions of non-figural Islamic art.

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112 Peggy Levitt, "Museums Must Attract Diverse Visitors or Risk Irrelevance," The Atlantic, last modified November 9, 2015, accessed April 16, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/museums-must-attract-diverse-visitors-or-risk-irrelevance/433347/.

113 Shalem, "What do we mean," 5.

Conclusion

The role of the epigraphic wares as mediators between Islamic art and Islam points to a much larger methodical problem present in the field today. The inclusion – or exclusion – of Islamic art objects in exhibitions that perform within the narrative of sociopolitical moments in American and European history allows museums to continue to assert themselves as cultural powers in the world, responsible for the interpretation of Islam in the face of political unrest between the Middle East, Europe, and America. The epigraphic ceramics from Nishapur were manipulated to fit the needs of the Iranian Expedition team, but the objects remain manipulated in *ALTICALSA* still today for the reason of maintaining the museum's powerful cultural status. Instead of representing the relationship between Islamic and European art history, the ceramics now facilitate the viewer's experience of the religion of Islam, since the galleries function as "teaching tools" for combating Islamophobia in America and Europe.[114]

The use of Islamic art by curators and scholars as a "good ambassador" for Islam has been rarely successful.[115] The epigraphic ceramics shoulder the burden of representing a multi-faceted religion during a period of social turbulence. The epigraphic wares are made to epitomize the usefulness and uniqueness of Islamic art, which is seen as completely separate from the fearful actions of fundamentalist terror groups, corrupt governments, or immoral religious leaders, all operating in the very countries listed in *ALTICALSA'*s title. The Museum knows their typical audience, and attempts to counter Islamophobia by showing the visitor the splendor and beauty of Islamic art.

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114 Cotter, "A Cosmopolitan,".

115 Shaw, "The Islam," 2.

Consequently, curators end up combating Islamophobia with Islamophilia. This idea is defined by scholar Mohammad H. Tamdgidi as:

> the other side of the Western orientalist attitude toward Islam, seeking to one-sidedly amplify, strengthen, and reinforce those elements and agencies in Islam that best suit the economic interests, political security, and cultural, moral, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic interests of the West and its orientalist looking glass self.[116]

Tamdgidi states that Islamophilia and Islamophobia are two sides of the same coin, in that both help maintain the status quo of colonial or neocolonial powers. On one hand, Islamophobia is perpetuated through attitudes in Western media, and on the other, Islamophilia attempts to eradicate these attitudes where it is seen beneficial to the West.[117] The actions described by Tamdgidi can be seen in the treatment of the epigraphic wares at the Museum. The formal attributes of the ceramics, which appealed to modern European aesthetics as outlined by scholars and curators in the 20th century, and the role of the ceramics as moral litigators for Islam during a time of political security in the 21st century were amplified and reinforced through their display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Therefore the ceramics, despite the best intentions by museum curators and scholars, the epigraphic ceramics from Nishapur are transformed in a neocolonial object that aides in the continuation of the role of Islamic art objects as a minor star in canonical, Eurocentric art history.

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116 Mohammad H. Tamdgidi, "Beyond Islamophobia and Islamophilia as Western Epistemic Racisms: Revisiting Runnymede Trust's Definition in a World-History Context," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 69.
117 Ibid.

Figures

Figure 1: Bowl with repeating inscription, “Oh, Abundant!”, late 9th century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 2: "Metalwork 1793 – 1880" from Wilson's *Mining The Museum*, 1992. (Stein, 1993)

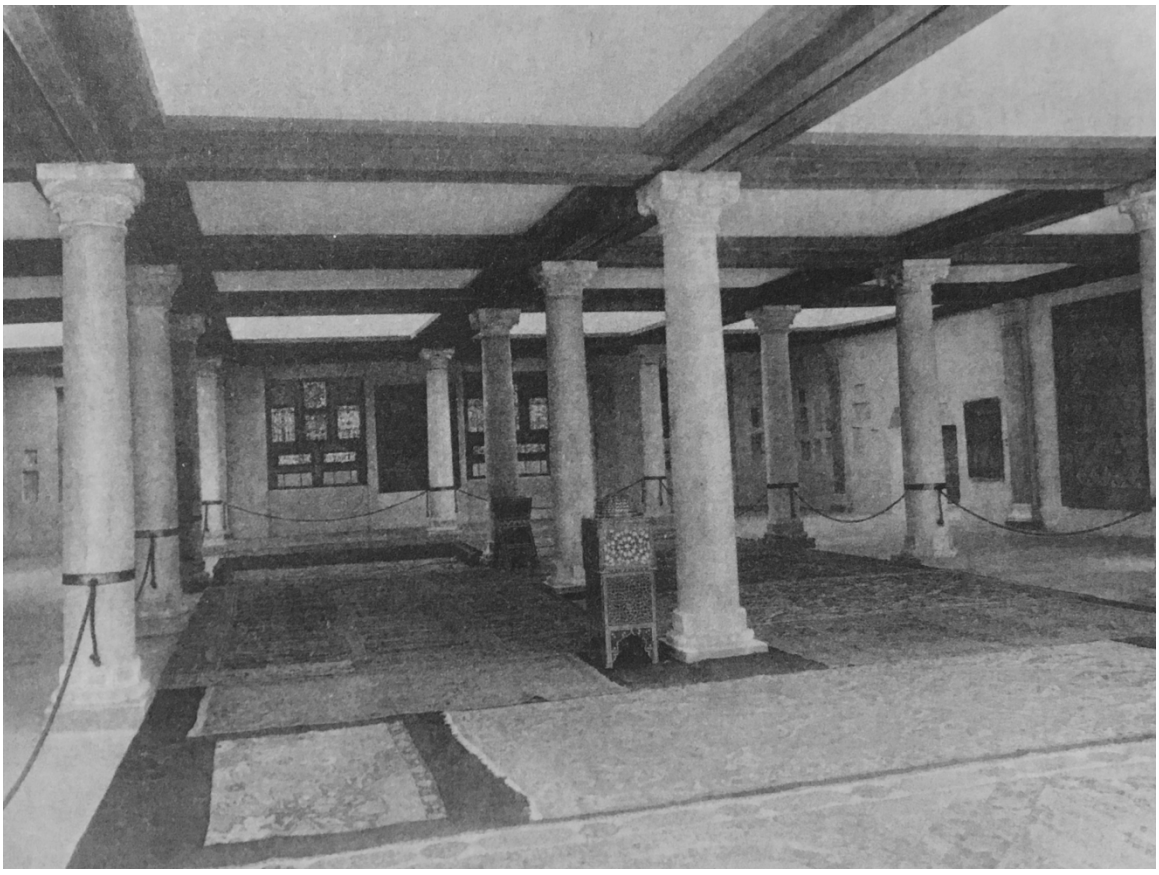


Figure 3: “Mosque Room” in the “Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst” exhibition, 1910. (Troelenberg, 2010)

Figure 4: The Moore Collection of Oriental Glass, 1907. (Lindsey, 2012)

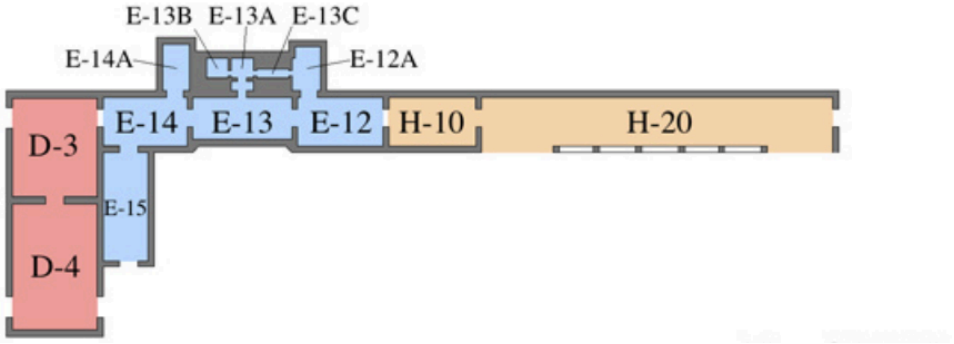


Figure 5: Floor Plan for the Near Eastern galleries, 1937. (Lindsey, 2012)

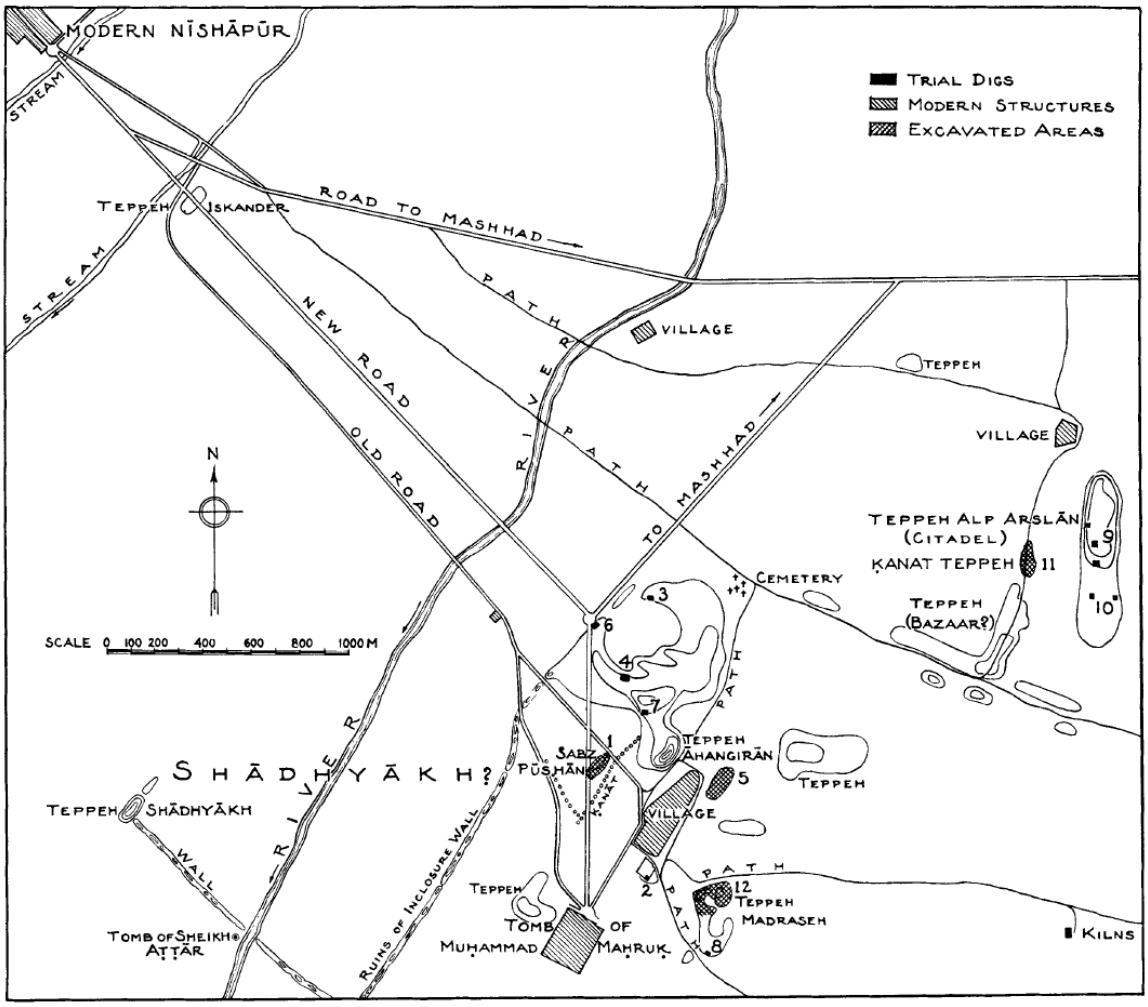


Figure 6: Map of the Nishapur excavation sites, 1938-1940. (Hauser and Wilkinson, 1942)

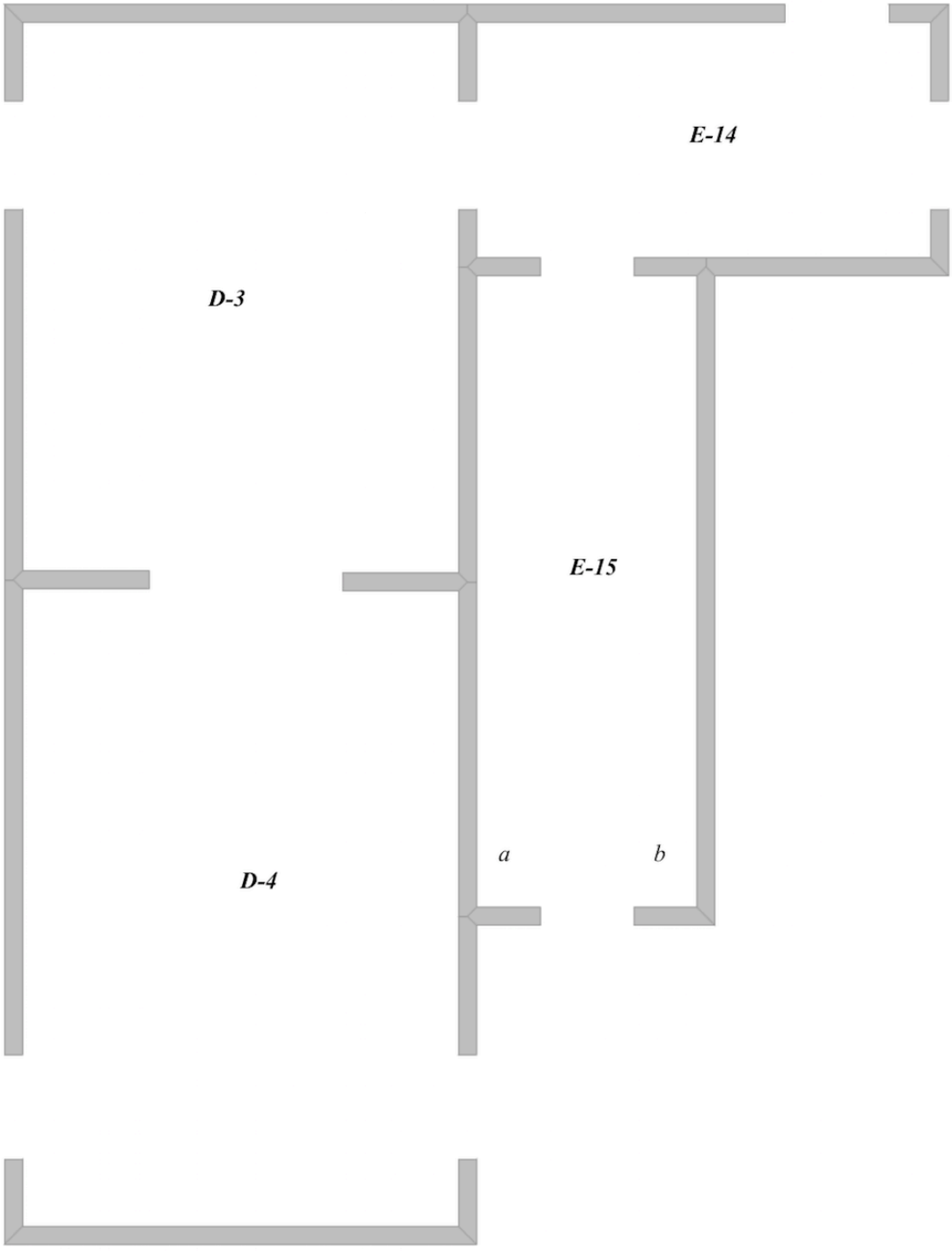


Figure 7: Detail of Gallery E-15 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1937.

Figure 8: Interior view of Gallery E-15, 1937. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 9: Interior view of Gallery E-15, 1937. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 10: Dado panel with inscription, “posterity”, 10th century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 11: Bowl with repeating inscription, “Blessing”, late 9th century – early 10th century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 12: Detail of Figure 8, vitrine containing white-on-black epigraphic bowl, 1937. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 13: Chalice of the Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, 1137-1140. (National Gallery of Art)

Figure 14: Installation view of the collection galleries at the Museum of Modern Art after the January, 2017 rehang. (Voon, 2017)

Figure 15: Bowl with Arabic Inscription, "He who multiplies his words, multiplies his worthlessness", 10th century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

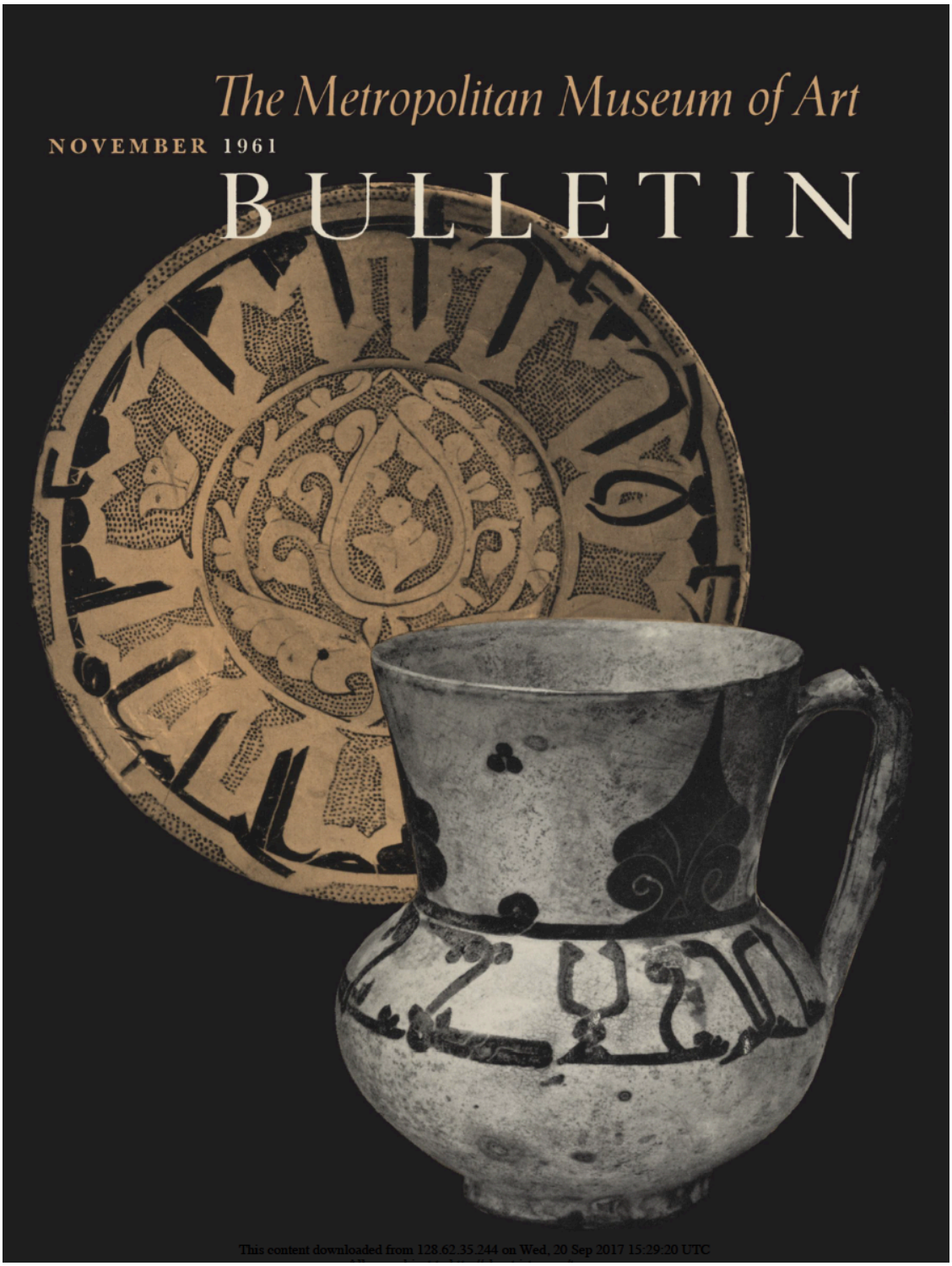


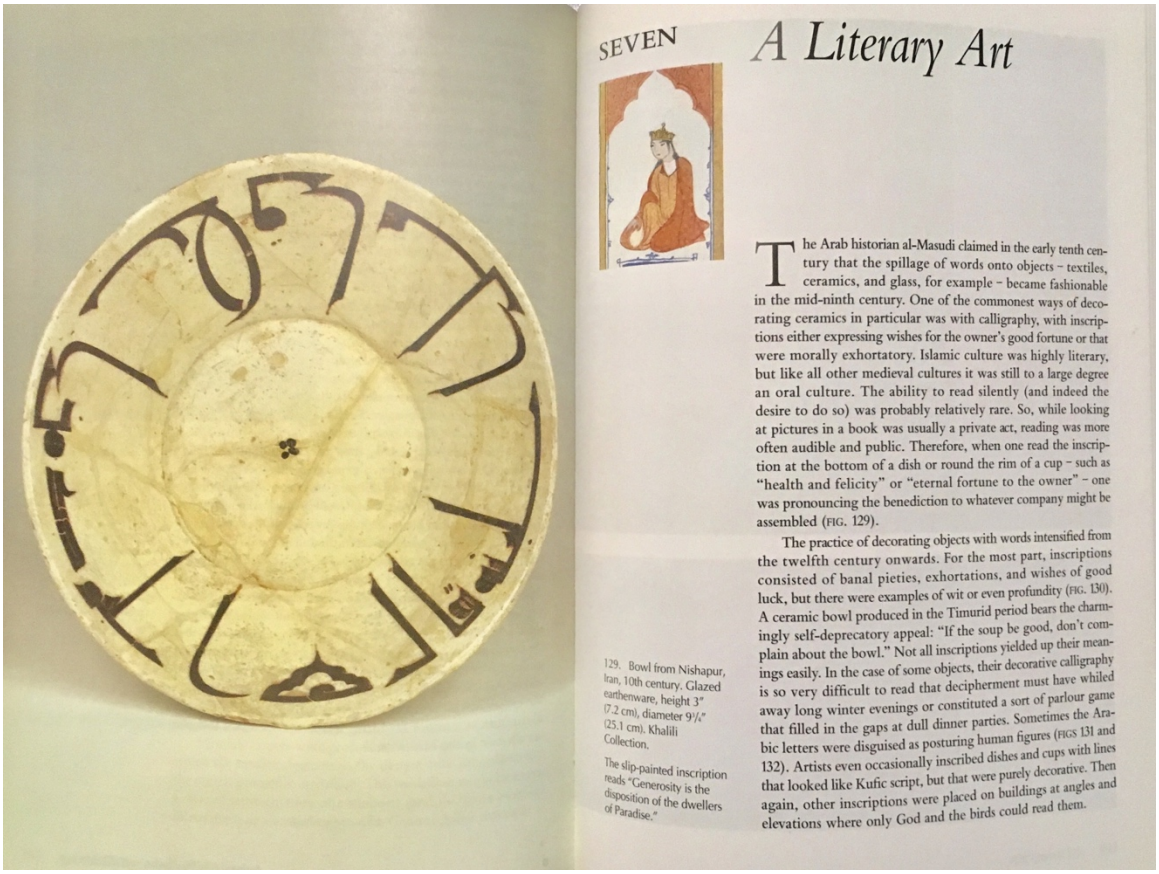
Figure 16: Cover of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Bulletin*, 1961. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 17: Henri Matisse, *French Window at Collioure*, 1914. (Musée National d'Art Moderne)

Figure 18: Photograph of the epigraphic ware in the entryway of the Islamic art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 19: Bowl with Arabic Inscription, 10th century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 20: Entryway to *Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, Later South Asia* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018.



SEVEN

A Literary Art

The Arab historian al-Masudi claimed in the early tenth century that the spillage of words onto objects – textiles, ceramics, and glass, for example – became fashionable in the mid-ninth century. One of the commonest ways of decorating ceramics in particular was with calligraphy, with inscriptions either expressing wishes for the owner's good fortune or that were morally exhortatory. Islamic culture was highly literary, but like all other medieval cultures it was still to a large degree an oral culture. The ability to read silently (and indeed the desire to do so) was probably relatively rare. So, while looking at pictures in a book was usually a private act, reading was more often audible and public. Therefore, when one read the inscription at the bottom of a dish or round the rim of a cup – such as "health and felicity" or "eternal fortune to the owner" – one was pronouncing the benediction to whatever company might be assembled (FIG. 129).

The practice of decorating objects with words intensified from the twelfth century onwards. For the most part, inscriptions consisted of banal pieties, exhortations, and wishes of good luck, but there were examples of wit or even profundity (FIG. 130). A ceramic bowl produced in the Timurid period bears the charmingly self-deprecatory appeal: "If the soup be good, don't complain about the bowl." Not all inscriptions yielded up their meanings easily. In the case of some objects, their decorative calligraphy is so very difficult to read that decipherment must have whiled away long winter evenings or constituted a sort of parlour game that filled in the gaps at dull dinner parties. Sometimes the Arabic letters were disguised as posturing human figures (FIGS 131 and 132). Artists even occasionally inscribed dishes and cups with lines that looked like Kufic script, but that were purely decorative. Then again, other inscriptions were placed on buildings at angles and elevations where only God and the birds could read them.

129. Bowl from Nishapur, Iran, 10th century. Glazed earthenware, height 3" (7.2 cm), diameter 9¹/₄" (25.1 cm). Khalili Collection.

The slip-painted inscription reads "Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise."

Figure 21: Excerpt from *Islamic Art in Context* by Robert Irwin including epigraphic bowl, 10th century. (Irwin, 1997)

Figure 22: Bowl with Kufic border, 10th century. (Musée du Louvre)

Figure 23: Current display case of the Nishapur excavation finds at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018.

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